



Photo by Justin Nestorick

Helen Zigmond lights a candle during the base's candlelight vigil ceremony as Zoltan Gancz looks on. The ceremony was held in honor of victims of the Holocaust Monday at the Warren Chapel Activities Center. The Holocaust Days of Remembrance are April 23 through Sunday.

Holocaust Days of Remembrance

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It's hard to dream a worse scenario: for your faith, ethnicity, disability or sexual preference you are squeezed onto a boxcar with other nameless faces, bound for an unknown destination. Imagine families torn apart and separated by many miles or a fence topped with barbed wire and vigilant soldiers sitting atop a watchtower. For many, that was reality. And for many of those, it began a torturous trip to their deaths.

In the book "Mein Kampf," written by Adolf Hitler, human beings were divided into higher or lower orders. The higher order, the Germanic male with fair skin, blue eyes and blonde hair, was supposedly superior to all others in the lower orders. The book also detailed Hitler's life as a youth, early days in the Nazi party, his dreams for a new Germany and personal ideas about politics and race.

On Jan. 30, 1933, Germany appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany and many Europeans faced the imminent prospect of selection as a "lower order" of humans.

By March 1933, Germans had opened the Dachau concentration camp, followed by Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbruck, a camp for women. The initial camp, Dachau, housed captured political adversaries to the Nazi party, primarily German Communists and Social Democrats.

The first year it was open, the camp housed 4,800 prisoners. The number rose to over 13,000 in 1937 as other groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, gypsies, homosexuals and repeat criminals were rounded up by German forces.

Originally Jewish prisoners were the minority, only imprisoned for belonging to one of the above categories or for violating the Nazi Nuremberg Laws of 1935, a pseudoscientific basis for racial discrimination against Jews.

The Germans operated several concentration camps within the borders of Germany, and many others sprouted throughout Europe as the German Army moved across

borders. After the occupation of Austria in March of 1938, Nazis began arresting and imprisoning German and Austrian Jews. Detainees suffered forced labor under inhuman conditions.

Originally inmates worked on small projects in the camp or nearby roads and later were forced to support the German war machine by working in armament factories. Dachau alone managed over 30 sub-camps at which over 30,000 detainees worked almost exclusively on war production.

The German army invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939. Schutzstaffel, commonly known as the SS, leader Heinrich Himmler issued orders to special action squads operating in Poland that Jews be gathered into ghettos near rail yards. The following month Hitler ordered the isolation of Jewish people. Ghettos isolated the Jewish population from non-Jews by walls and barbed wire fences. Living conditions were crowded and unsanitary but luxurious compared to that of life inside one of the many concentration camps.

Detainees experienced unthinkable cruelties in everyday life: waking early on a cold winter day and showering in near freezing water; reportedly fed as little as one pint of watery soup in the morning, two pints of soup at lunch, and another pint of coffee with bread; medical experiments took place in some of the camps with no regard for life.

Some experiments included high-altitude experimentation using a low-pressure chamber in support of the German air force. Scientists conducted various experiments on twins, and exposed several "undesirable" ethnic groups to various contagious diseases to determine survivability. Other cruelties included experiments in mass sterilization to find the most efficient method to sterilize those that the Nazis considered "racially inferior."

The lucky ones, if for no other available description, were forced to work long hours with guards watching at the ready or vicious canines at their heels. Inmates endured the stench of death all over the camp or wherever forced to work. If prisoners couldn't

produce enough or didn't move swift enough, they might be shot where they stood. Many times guards shot detainees for target practice or for amusement.

German leaders questioned what should be done with millions of detained and displaced Jews and others. By the summer of 1941, the fate of the Jews would be sealed. Hitler ordered the "The Final Solution;" the wholesale extermination of the Jewish people. Nazis trapped Jews within the confines of the already established ghettos and then transported them to death camps like Birkenau. Upon arrival all belongings were left behind. Men and women formed separate lines, where a Nazi officer would conduct a "selection." Healthy people would be designated for forced labor. The others, like the sick, the disabled, the elderly and young children, were bound for the gas chamber. Camps such as Birkenau had capacity for as many as 200,000 prisoners, and the gas chambers at the camp were reportedly able to facilitate the deaths of 8,000 to 12,000 daily. By the war's end, 5 to 6 million Jews would be exterminated at death camps.

The tide of the war had turned against German forces well before 1945. As Allied forces moved across Europe, many began to experience concentration camp prisoners, many of which had survived death marches, excursions in extremely harsh conditions with disregard to life and health of prisoners which often resulted in numerous deaths, into central Germany.

Liberation of the largest concentration camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, took place in January 1945. Following the death marches, Soviet soldiers found only a few emaciated prisoners that remained alive and abundant evidence of mass murder. Retreating Germans managed to destroy large portions of the inhumane operations, but some evidence proved hard to hide. The following weeks and months saw many Allied units stumble upon the hard-to-hide German secrets. In April of 1945, the 6th Armored Division of the U.S. Army arrived to liberate the camp at Buchenwald.

Liberators experienced piles of corpses lying unburied and liberated inmates who reassembled skeletons from lack of food and demanding forced labor. American forces freed inmates of the Dachau camp on April 29, 1945.

When approaching the camp, soldiers found more than 30 railroad cars filled with bodies in advanced stages of decomposition. Only after the liberation of the Nazi camps was the full scope of Nazi horrors exposed to the world.

By the end of 1943, a growing consensus amongst the Allies favored war crimes trials for German leaders and perpetrators. Starting in October of 1945 the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg tried 22 major war criminals on charges of conspiracy, crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The court consisted of judges from the Soviet Union, France, United Kingdom and the United States. Crimes against humanity included murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or persecution based on political, racial or religious grounds. Twelve defendants received death sentences, three received life in prison and three received lengthy prison sentences. Three defendants were acquitted.

Following the Nuremberg trial, which ended in October 1946, American authorities conducted 12 further trials of German officials. These trials were known as the Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings.

April 23 through Sunday has been set aside as Days of Remembrance. Let us pause in our busy routines and reflect on what happened when the world looked the other way. Remember what can happen to good people when bigotry, hatred and intolerance reign in a society. If you think this can't happen now, simply reflect on what you have heard about Cambodia, Kosovo, Rwanda, and today in Sudan, and resolve to do what you can to keep it from happening again.

Further information can be obtained at www.ushmm.org or www.yadvashem.org

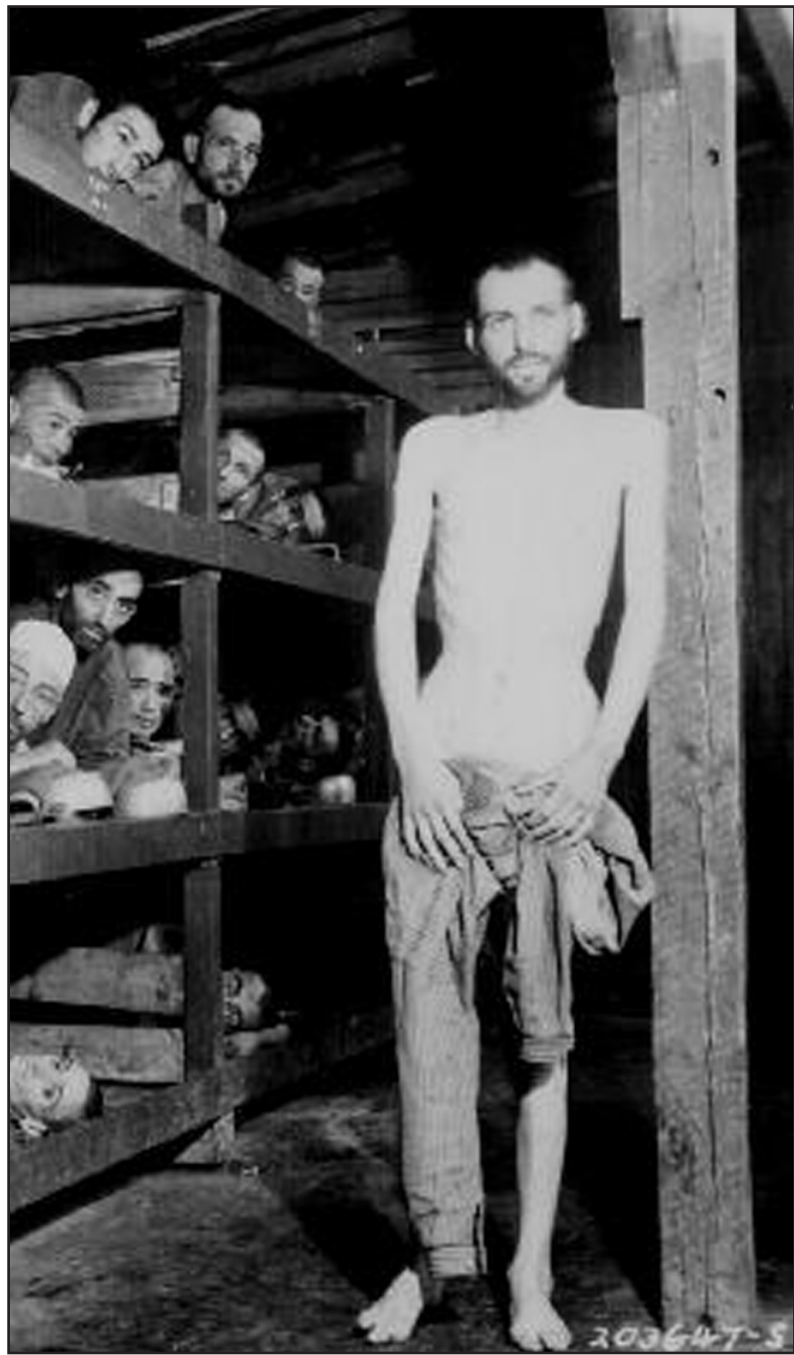


Photo courtesy United States Holocaust Museum

This is the men's barracks at the Buchenwald concentration camp. It was liberated by Allied forces April 1945. By war's end, 5 to 6 million Jewish people died during the Holocaust.



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